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ABSTRACT

American incompetence in second language skills can be remedied by training academically gifted children as true bilinguals in languages widely used and badly needed for business and political interactions in an increasingly interdependent world. Those identified as gifted, who also exhibit the characteristics of successful second language learners (identified by the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education in 1975), should be encouraged to enroll in second language classes. Their coursework can be accelerated and should include enrichment exercises exploring aspects of the language and culture. Linguistically talented students should be encouraged to begin studying a second foreign language after achieving some proficiency in the first and should be urged to study languages other than the traditional French, Spanish and German. (JW)

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Foreign Languages for the Gifted and Talented

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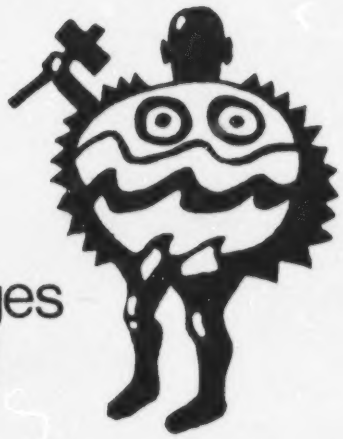

Foreign Languages for the Gifted and Talented

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Foreign Languages for the Gifted and Talented

This paper on foreign language study for the gifted and talented is not written from the premise that only such students should study languages. On the contrary, we on the second language staff of the Department of Education advocate the principle that the opportunity to study the language and culture of another people should be given to *every* student. However, we believe that today, more than ever, we should be taking advantage of the special qualities of academically gifted children to help produce something this country sorely needs: a cadre of real bilinguals competent in the languages widely used internationally in today's increasingly interdependent world.

The President's Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies recently documented the incompetence of Americans in foreign languages; and it has called our inability to communicate with other nations in their languages shameful, uneconomical, scandalous and downright dangerous. We have recognized in recent years the need for foreign language competence in international business. We have also witnessed the embarrassment of our leaders having to communicate through interpreters in delicate international situations that required a real understanding of another culture—a culture that is manifested in its language, with all of its nuances, implications and fine shadings in meaning.

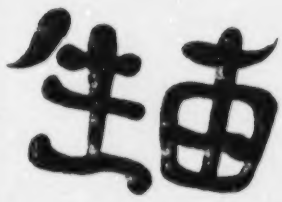
We have in our schools a small percentage (about 17 percent nationwide) of students studying three western European languages—French, German and Spanish. However, we need to learn other major languages spoken in the other parts of the world with which we are intimately involved. We need, also, to increase the length of the sequences of study in order to develop real proficiency.

Even involvement in international global matters like the Vietnam war has little effected our teaching habits. It has been determined that during that war in 1970 there were only 18 persons studying the Vietnamese language in all American colleges and universities. Conversations with the Ayotollah Khomeini in the last few months have had to be conducted through interpreters, because in the USA we don't study Farsi. We have been able to talk with Anwar Sadat and Menachim Begin without interpreters only because they have taken the time to learn English while few in American government know Arabic or Hebrew.

World circumstances today make it urgent that we train some of our academically bright children to be real linguists. Now is the ideal time for us to emphasize putting the abilities of our gifted children to the service of society and thus discharging a portion of the schools' social responsibilities. Here is the ideal situation for recognizing and realizing the underdeveloped human resources in our schools: those identified as gifted and talented. Among those usually overlooked in such identification are Black Americans, females, members of lower socio-economic groups and non-English dominant students.

We must first identify the gifted and talented. Who are they? They are usually associated only with talents in science, mathematics, native language communication and the arts; and they are defined as having I.Q.'s of 120 or above, being in the upper 3-5 percent of the student population and scoring in the 500-600's in the SAT's.

The academically talented do have some characteristics in common, but they are also subject to wide variations. Some of them have many interests, while some concentrate all their energies in one interest. Some are well adjusted, whereas others may be ill-adjusted. Some may easily adapt to systems and organizations and others may resist efforts to conform. Some are at home in honors and advanced placement courses, while some find these distasteful. Some are superior in many subjects, while some fail some subjects but are superior in one.



We must look for gifted students among not only the happy, well-adjusted, efficient youngsters who win all the honors, but also among the socially unacceptable, the wild and unruly, and even the apparent scholastic failures. Think of Albert Einstein and Thomas A. Edison. We would not be wise to identify merely the clever grade getters and expert test passers and then pass over the many original, creative minds that may not be included in those categories.

The successful second language learner has an additional set of characteristics, according to research done by the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education in 1975. As determined by this study, the good second language learner is different in the following ways:

1. Field independence—the students' facility in separating information from noise, that is, selecting appropriate linguistic stimuli while ignoring inappropriate ones.

2. Ambiguity tolerance—the learner's ability to cope better with the new, the difficult, the paradoxical in a given task.

3. Balanced generalization—the ability of good second language learners to classify linguistic data in neither too wide nor too narrow a manner. Good language learners use the target language as a separate reference system independent of the native language.

4. Extroversion—students who are successful in oral fluency in the target language usually possess a degree of agressiveness and daring.

5. Good language learners know something about their learning style. Regardless of the teacher's style or the style of the materials, the learners can integrate things into their own cognitive styles.

6. A successful language learner actively seeks arenas in which to use the target language.

7. Successful language learners feel comfortable taking risks, and they do so often. They are willing to place themselves in situations where they might feel silly in order to communicate their intentions by any means within their power.

8. They are excellent guessers. They manipulate linguistic clues to form hypotheses or guesses, which are then tested and evaluated.

9. Successful language learners pay attention to form as well as meaning. They consciously want to know about underlying patterns and rule-governed relationships. They are excellent monitors of their own target-language use, and they request judgment and correction from native speakers of the target language.

10. Good second language learners quickly adjust to the new target language as early as possible.

11. A marked degree of empathy is a major characteristic of successful second language learners. They are sensitive to other people's feelings and have outgoing relationships with people around them.

With all this information and with a gift for sizing up the adolescent mind, we should be able to identify our students. After that, the next question is, "What do we do with them?" It would be unprofitable to simply speed up the familiar course in a high pressure manner. Rather, we should try to awaken and sustain interest in the subject. We want to encourage not just memorization, but the learning of information within a context of relationships. Bright youngsters usually learn the necessary facts quickly, absorb them, store them, take them apart and put them together again. They can grasp relationships quickly, generalize from particulars, draw inferences, relate what is learned here to what is learned somewhere else—all of which is involved in second language learning. This kind of taxonomical structure, reflected through Bloom's structure, is highly stressed as appropriate strategy for gifted/talented teaching and learning.

A certain amount of acceleration can be used for gifted children along with enrichment. They can skip, speed up and be released from lock-step learning; and they can carry more than the normal load. One caution about judging when the student may be allowed to move ahead. We must not assume too quickly that mastery has been achieved. Language structured points need not only to be understood, but to be nailed down by some repetitive drill, even for the talented student, especially in such cumulative subjects as foreign languages. Although this drill is usually not as tedious nor as lengthy for the bright learner, nevertheless it is necessary. Memory is faulty even among the gifted.

Enriching the curriculum for linguistically talented students may be achieved by encouraging them to explore aspects of the language for which the slower students cannot afford the time. For instance, they can use interviews, library work, summer programs under the direction of chosen teachers, after-hours activities or Saturday activities. They can be stimulated to study more intensely and to delve deeper into the subject for which they have shown special aptitude. They can be set to work on some specialties or side issues that interest them and that may "illuminate" the whole subject.

The enrichment program can be an unusual opportunity for original and creative work without detracting from (indeed, making use of) the attention that must be given to fundamentals.

Foreign language study is especially appropriate for the academically gifted, linguistically talented students who are less intellectually inhibited than their peers, who are highly curious, who want to know the hows and whys, who are responsive to the concrete but are aware of imagery in language, and who possess a more highly developed sense of wonder and are highly receptive to things out of the ordinary.

The department has searched for foreign language programs for the gifted in and around Pennsylvania. They are few. Maryland has an intensive summer language program for talented students; Philadelphia, Pa., has advanced placement programs for upper-level secondary students; North Hills School District has a Russian language program for the gifted and talented; Pittsburgh has advanced placement courses in grades 10-12 and scholars programs beginning with grade 8. Of Pennsylvania's 505 school districts, 85 offer advanced placement courses in foreign languages. All enrich the language program.

We should like to suggest that these programs might better serve the talents of these students by making foreign language a part of the core curriculum and the medium for learning other subjects. It could be truly interdisciplinary through a liaison with social studies, science, mathematics, art, music, nutrition and physical education.

Further, the linguistically talented student should be encouraged to begin studying a second foreign language after achieving a degree of proficiency in the first. We encourage special-interest conversation groups, the reading of target-language materials of special interest, and oral and written reports. Fluency could be developed with pen pals and tape pals and by other contact with native speakers.

Most important, the department encourages—indeed urges—linguistically talented students to study languages other than the traditional western European triumvirate of French, German and Spanish. This country desperately needs some diplomats and business persons skilled in the cultures and languages of those who speak Mandarin Chinese, Russian, Japanese, Farsi, Twi, Ga, Hausa, Amharic, Efik, Korean, Laotian, Swahili, Yuroba, Tagalog, Vietnamese, Khmer, Arabic and a host of other languages. Along with study of these languages must go immersion in the culture. In this manner we could develop true bilinguals—the cadre of linguistically competent persons that was mentioned at the beginning—and thus put the abilities of our bright students to the service of society.

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